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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS)

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SUBJECT: EU OPTIMISTIC ABOUT FUTURE GOT COOPERATION

REF: TUNIS 1503

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (S/NF) EU Charge de Mission Bernard Philippe told the Ambassador on December 4 that the November 19 Association Council meeting with Tunisia, which was preceded by the November 12 Sub-Committee Meeting on Human Rights, had given a "boost" to EU-Tunisian relations. Philippe said the two meetings had reaffirmed the two parties "strong partnership" and the will to resume dialogue, which would be extremely positive if it delivers. Philippe opined to the Ambassador that Foreign Minister Abdallah, who had led the Tunisian delegation to the Council meeting, can be disingenuous in meetings and can react "violently" when sensitive political topics are raised. Philippe proposed, and the Ambassador agreed, the establishment of a US-EU "systematic dialogue" in Tunis on key issues of joint interest, including human rights, judicial reform and economic governance. End Summary.

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A WARMING OF RELATIONS  
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¶2. (S/NF) On December 4, EU Charge de Mission Bernard Philippe (strictly protect) told the Ambassador that he felt the November 19 Association Council meeting in Brussels represented a warming after almost two years of stagnation and difficulty in EU-Tunisia relations. Particularly in the past twelve months, Philippe said there had been no opportunities for political dialogue and that the overall bilateral dialogue was "very poor." Despite that fact that "we are the 75 percent" (i.e., the EU is the source of the majority of Tunisia's trade, investment and tourism revenues), Philippe said the EU had not been particularly influential on certain issues. The November 19 Council meeting and the preceding November 12 Sub-Committee meeting on Human Rights, however, reaffirmed the strong partnership between the EU and Tunisia. Philippe said that there was a clear will to resume a systematic dialogue and that it seemed the Tunisian side was committed to deliver. Philippe said he hoped the Sub-Committee on "home issues" (justice, liberty, security, counterterrorism) would be convened in the first quarter of 2008. Similarly, Philippe said he hoped the two sides could discuss "internal market" issues which could address the necessary service liberalization that could spur economic growth and job creation in Tunisia.

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FM ABDALLAH: OFF-SCRIPT  
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¶3. (S/NF) Philippe then detoured to talk about Foreign Minister Abdallah's personality. Philippe initially commented on Abdallah's tendency to use "excessive superiority" when talking about Tunisia and Ben Ali's twenty years of rule. Philippe citing Abdallah's comment, "If (the EU) has problems with press freedom in Tunisia, it's your fault since you only read the French press," opining disingenuously that the Arabic media was more free. Later, Philippe related Abdallah's "annoying" suggestion to EU FM Solana in early 2007 that all Tunisia had to do to prevent terrorism was patrol its borders. When Solana pressed Abdallah on the disrupted December/January security incidents, Abdallah was similarly dismissive, saying the case was "closed" and purely a group coming from Algeria.

¶4. (S/NF) Philippe commented that Abdallah's personality was most revealing when the Foreign Minister veered from his official talking points. He noted that Abdallah had been "very nasty" when discussing several Tunisian NGOs, and particularly on the topic of the opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP). When the EU raised two particular human rights cases (lawyer Mohamed Abbou and Tunisian Human Rights League activist Ali Ben Salem), Abdallah reacted "very violently." Philippe also highlighted Abdallah's insistence on refuting an EU suggestion, during the closing press conference, that there were any "divergences" on positions, noting Abdallah spent over five minutes disputing this possibility.

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US-EU COOPERATION  
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¶5. (S/NF) Philippe closed the 75-minute meeting with the Ambassador by suggesting the establishment of a systematic dialogue between the US and EU missions in Tunisia. Philippe said there were three main areas on which the EU would propose we focus: 1) Prison conditions, arbitrary imprisonment and torture, 2) Judicial Reform, and 3) Economic Governance. On the first item, Philippe said he was very concerned about the possibility that those involved in the December/January security incidents might be sentenced to death, which "could totally derail (EU-Tunisian) relations." On judicial reform, Philippe said the EU had funded a two million Euro project that was only able to deliver equipment due to GOT intransigence. Finally, Philippe said that EU hoped to expand its economic dialogue with Tunisia to encourage greater liberalization. The Ambassador said the USG had similar concerns and welcomed expanded US-EU cooperation in all three areas.

COMMENT  
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¶6. (S/NF) Despite Philippe's comments on FM Abdallah's tendency to become dismissive when confronted on sensitive issues, he was positive that Tunisian-EU relations may be on the mend if several upcoming meetings move ahead as planned. If so, EU efforts to promote human rights and economic reform would dovetail nicely with our own. In any case, the two missions are increasingly exchanging views on mutual priorities, which can only strengthen our hands with the GOT.  
End Comment.

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